

Books to Prisoners

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92 Pike Street, Box A
Seattle, WA 98101

206-527-3339
www.bookstoprisoners.net



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Chairman Wheeler, Commissioner Clyburn, and all other concerned parties,

I am writing today to support reforms to the excessive telecommunication rates and fees that inmates and their families face today. The ICS fact sheet released on September 30, 2015 shows important reforms being brought under consideration, including improved access for inmates with disabilities and a ban on flat-rate calling. These measures are long overdue.

For more than a decade, under-regulated telecommunication charges have unduly taxed the families of inmates. Some families are charged \$1.22/minute and spend \$60 each week to speak with their loved onesⁱ. Most families are subjected to hidden fees that bloat the cost of each phone call as much as 40%ⁱⁱ. Through the currently legal system of “commissions,” private companies promise a cut of the money generated from phone calls back to the contracting government agency; under commissions, both parties have an incentive to increase their expenses without sufficient regard to their impact.

These charges prevent families—many of whom already face severe financial burdens related to incarcerationⁱⁱⁱ—from maintaining contact with inmates. Studies repeatedly show that maintaining a strong support network through regular communication is vital to successful re-entry^{iv}. It is therefore in everyone’s best interests to encourage inmate re-entry by providing reasonable and just rates for communication—and not to leave this decision in the hands of corporations.

In 2013, the FCC voted to limit the charges on interstate phone calls. Limiting the charges on intrastate phone calls would represent the next step in protecting these financially vulnerable populations from exploitation. I urge the FCC to enact the reforms currently under consideration—and then to probe further to address problems with video visitations and other correctional communications.

Sincerely,

Michelle Dillon
(Program Coordinator)

ⁱ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/31/us/steep-costs-of-inmate-phone-calls-are-under-scrutiny.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.prisonpolicy.org/phones/pleasedeposit.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://whopaysreport.org/>

^{iv} <http://www.stthomas.edu/media/interprofessionalcenter/FinalListeningSessionReport140318.pdf>